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THE DANVILLE AND FORT CLARK ROAD.

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There is perhaps nothing which occurs in the progress of any given country or state from its primitive condition of savagery to that of civilization, than the conditions from time to time of its roads and means of transportation from one part of that country to another. The "trace" of the aborigine, the country "mud" road, the "pike" are stations in progress.

It goes without saying that in the beginning of the change of the condition of Illinois from that of a home only for wild men and no less wild animals, none of those indicia of civilization known now as roads and highways, were in existence. But from this it must not be understood that there were no paths or trails used by men and animals in passing from one grove or feeding range to another, or from one meadow where buffaloes and other animals grazed to the salt springs to which they as well as the Indians had resort for salt; or from one Indian village to another, for such existed and were found by the first white adventurers, everywhere.

Prof. Archer Butler Hulbert, author of *Historic Highways of America*, in volume 1 of that valuable series, has well pointed out the existence and origin of these primary roads: "It was for the great game animals to mark out what became known as the first thoroughfares of America. The plunging buffalo, keen of instinct, and nothing if not utilitarian, broke great roads across the continent on the summits of the watersheds, beside which the first Indian trails were but traces through the forests. Heavy, fleet of foot, capable of covering scores of miles a day, the buffalo tore his roads from one feeding ground to another, and from north to south, on the high grounds;

here his roads were swept clear of debris in summer, and snow in winter. They mounted the heights and descended from them on the longest slopes, and crossed each stream at the bars at the mouths of its lesser tributaries. * * *

The first explorers that entered the interior of the American continent were dependent upon the buffalo and Indian for the ways of getting about. Few of the early white men who came westward journeyed on the rivers, as the journals of Gist and Walker attest, and to the trails of the buffalo and Indian they owed their success in bringing to the seaboard the first accounts of the interior of the continent."

So in Illinois. The earliest comers found paths and traces leading across the country which, in a measure, aided them in finding the shortest cuts from timber grove to timber grove, but such were not of human origin. Before even the Indian came to hunt the wild animals, these animals, in search of water or pasturage, made their traces or paths, always choosing the best and shortest lines of travel. The earliest comers to this as to other new countries found ready made roads, of the primitive sort, which they utilized until through the progress of years, they could do better.

It is the purpose of this paper to put upon the record some recollections of one of these early roads, first made by the wild animals which a century ago roamed at will over our prairies and through our groves, adopted by the wild Indian and in turn utilized by the first white men who attempted here to plant the homes of civilized men. Reference is thus made to the road of those early days which lead from the Indiana line near Danville, through the counties of Vermilion, Champaign, McLean and Tazewell, to Fort Clark, where now stands the City of Peoria, known in local parlance as the "Danville & Fort Clark Road."

Some of the early map makers recognized the existence of this road and traced its course upon their maps in its wanderings from grove to grove and from timber belt to

timber belt, in irregular courses between its eastern and western terminals. So marked, it lead from the Wabash river to the Illinois river, connecting at that date only the towns of Danville, Bloomington and Peoria. In so doing it crossed the middle fork of the Vermilion river near what in early days was known as the "Salt Works," six miles west of Danville; the Salt Fork of the Vermilion at Prather's ford a mile north of where is now the village of St. Joseph; the Sangamon at Newcom's ford and bearing northwest, made Cheeney's Grove, in McLean county, thence to Bloomington and Peoria.

It requires little stretch of the imagination to account for its origin upon the theory above quoted from Professor Hulbert. At what was probably its earliest eastern terminus, were the salt springs of the Vermilion, near Danville, from time immemorial the resort of the herds of buffalo and deer, as well as of the Indian. Thence westward it led by and through the timber belts of the Salt Fork, the Big Grove, the Sangamon timber, Cheeney's Grove. Blooming Grove and the timber belts of the Mackinaw and Illinois rivers. Between these resorts of the Indian and the wild animals lay many open prairies, the finest of hunting and grazing grounds of the Grand Prairie. Naturally the instinctive buffalo, many generations of which fed upon these prairies, to satisfy his cravings for salt, would often resort to the Vermilion salt springs, always following the same path, which, as shown later in the "Danville & Fort Clark Road" of the early white inhabitants, occupied "the summits of the watersheds," in all cases avoiding the low grounds, except at the crossings of streams.

The coming of the Indian, if in fact his coming was preceded by that of the buffalo, having the same necessities and cravings as the animals, made use of this path or trace in aid of his migrations in pursuit of food and salt. Upon it or rather beside it, he readily waylaid and

captured the buffalo and deer traveling thereon and at its eastern termination he gathered his supply of salt as it oozed from the springs.

It will also be remembered that about what is now the flourishing city of Danville, were the habitations for many years of some parts of the wild Indians known as the Kickapoos, with subdivisions of the same people under other and different names. The capital city of these people is said by Judge H. W. Beckwith, in his "Illinois and Indiana Indians," to have been located at a point in McLean county known as Old Town Timber, now West Township, where the largest part of the nation made its permanent abode. The later line of the Danville & Fort Clark Road, connected these two Kickapoo towns by the shortest and most direct route; and to the frequent use of the same by these kindred people in going and coming, on social visits and hunting excursions, as well as upon errands of war, may well be attributed its well worn appearance when first seen by white men. Doubtless, it had many times been followed by this warlike people when making their hostile incursions among the frontier settlements of Kentucky, Virginia and Pennsylvania, and that it had as often witnessed the returns of these war parties from successful expeditions, laden with the spoils of cruel war, the scalps of unfortunate victims and followed by bound prisoners upon their way to lives of captivity or worse to become victims of the fiery stake at Old Town Timber. So the earlier probabilities concerning the uses to which the incipient and later useful highway was put, are anything but soothing.

Traditions of the earlier settlers along this road are uniform as to its location and condition when white men first sought out homes in those counties. They, however, were not the first civilized men who saw and made use of it.

Before the establishment of either of the counties above named as those traversed by the road in question, the

territory west of the Illinois river, though farther north than either of those counties, and farther from the settled portions of the State, became largely settled and by the year 1825 was organized into counties. The reason which may account for this was the allotment of that territory by the government for the use of the soldiers of the war of 1812, and the large emigration thereto about that time. This road, or "trace" as it was before then, was the nearest available route for this large incoming of prospective citizens from the regions of Kentucky and Indiana to the "Military Tract," and was made use of for that purpose. Before the United States survey of the lands now forming the counties of Vermilion and Champaign, the "trace," before them for ages, perhaps, followed only by a single path, had become a road much used by wagons and other vehicles, bearing westward this tide of emigrants. Crossing the Wabash river at Fort Harrison, near Terre Haute, it made the region of Danville where the "trace" westward was encountered and made use of.

By this route it is probable that there came those advance couriers of civilization known in all the western country as "squatters," who are the first to occupy the country with permanent homes. They were in fact the actual occupants of many tracts along the road, as was told by the permanent residents who came a little later by this road and in many cases bought the squatter's rights to cabins and other improvements. Their only rights in the soil were those incident to occupancy, for but rarely did this class legally enter the land from the government. Having sold their homes they moved on by the same road to repeat, in other and farther western regions, the process.

So, for the same reasons, it is a historical fact, known to the writer, that along this Danville and Fort Clark road, in the counties of Vermilion and Champaign, and probably in other counties, were the first permanent settlements of those counties made. It is also a fact that

at a point at the north end of what in early days was known as the "Big Grove," in the latter county, as a result of this early tendency, in 1833, when the county was given its legal existence, was the largest settlement in the county, and it became the most prominent candidate for county seat honors. Other influences, however, decided the contest in favor of a much smaller settlement four miles farther south and at a point where no road existed.

By legislative act in 1831, this buffalo trace was made a public highway, and its course from Pekin to Danville, through Blooming Grove, Cheeney's Grove, Big Grove to its eastern termination, by legal enactment fully recognized. So, the records of the board of county commissioners of Vermilion county, as early as 1828, show a recognition of the road by the name of the "Fort Clark Road," in an order providing for its improvement within that county by apportioning the road work due under the law to it. Other counties may have done the same.

Traditions among the descendants of the early white inhabitants who made their homes along its course, tell of the great streams of immigrants who made use of it, of the camping grounds near the streams and groves and of the fords where, in the absence of bridges, the streams were crossed.

As the county was taken possession of by permanent residents and the courses of travel were changed by the growing up of cities and villages upon other lines, this road was in a large measure abandoned or rather in some cases re-located upon the lines of government surveys of the adjacent lands, so that now little of it remains. It is but a reminiscence. Yet in places the great gullies worn by the passing wheels fully witness the facts of the past, and to the questions of the younger generations who ask why these unfilled furrows in the pastures and groves, the answers of the few remaining pioneers is "The Danville and Fort Clark Road!"